

Scholar-Practitioner Identity

A Liminal Perspective

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Abstract

In this article the author attempts to identify the processes associated with the development of identity as a scholar-practitioner and provide insight into how positionality in effecting change in our world is perceived. The author begins by presenting an overview of scholar-practitioner ideology, as well as an examination of the deconstruction and construction processes of self-identity within these principles. The ideas of “otherness” and liminality are employed in an effort to explain identity development as a personal journey that stands to profoundly influence those with whom one collaborates and/or leads.

Introduction

The process of examining scholar-practitioner leadership identity exposes the importance of developing an understanding of one’s identity as it relates to self as well as how it functions in relation to others. This requires that individuals identify the adopted associative virtues and dispositions of both their personal lives and professional roles. During development as a scholar-practitioner leader, the boundaries between private and public identity become blurred and those values and virtues deemed important in one aspect of life often spill over to the other. As I began the process of evaluating my own identity, I became aware that for the past few years, I had been involved in a process of deconstructing my beliefs and values and in uncovering my involvement and participation in traditions and systems that while not obvious or deliberate, often served to support inequity and injustice.

My desire to serve others and promote democratic learning has been constricted by perceptions forged through my membership in a white, Euro-centric dominated society. While I have resisted ideology that blatantly ignores or discounts cultures that run counter to dominant controls, I was unaware of the “many seemingly benign cultural assumptions that justify and direct an unjust status quo” (Eichelberger, 1999, p. 3). Although naïve, I believed that American values centered on providing opportunity for all. I operated within a system of purported democracy that in reality marginalized and oppressed those outside the dominant class. Eichelberger (1999) explains, “Few Americans would endorse the belief that the domination and oppression of others leads to a happy and just society” (p. 4). However, her work of examining individuals’ relationships with society as depicted in popular American literature focuses on the “unmasking of inhumane social and cultural conditions beneath the surface of a self-proclaimed democracy” (p. 3). For example, Eichelberger (1999) states that many Americans,

Readily endorse the concept of individualism, the belief that individuals are responsible for shaping their own fates and can earn happiness by striving to succeed in competition with others. . . . Told from this Euro-American perspective, history seems to confirm the appealing notion of a New Adam who is able to forge his own destiny, to make his own fortune; individualism seems to be what produces a meritocracy. (p. 4)

It is here that I began to recognize the liminal positioning of my growth as a scholar-practitioner leader. Liminality is derived from the Latin, *limen*, that means threshold and is representative of those periods associated with change in which individuals cross boundaries and morph from one identity to another. Conroy and Ruyter (2009) posit:

Liminal positions are inextricably linked to the notion of boundaries and borders, which may be construed as static entities, their nature and shape normally determined by the centre. To construe the liminal only as a fixed point or border position runs the risk of misrepresenting it as somewhat static, a kind of position that one can occupy on a permanent or semi-permanent basis. This lacks the subtlety necessary for recognizing and responding to political, cultural and ethical changes, which might emerge from the centre. We wish to argue that a fundamental feature of liminality is its lack of fixity or permanence; it is not and cannot be a fixed space, a fixed point or a fixed set of processes because things are liminal with respect to other things, primarily the centre. (p. 5)

Liminality then, involves the dismantling of current beliefs and understandings and restructuring those ideas within the realm of constantly changing insight and theory.

Carnes (2004) describes liminality as “that threshold region where the normal rules of society are suspended or subverted. Liminal settings are characterized by uncertainty and emotional intensity, by the inversion of status and social hierarchies, and by imaginative expressiveness” (p. B7). Scholar-practitioners evolve within a state of liminality characterized by feelings and emotions that range from ambiguity, questioning, confusion, and apprehension, to openness, understanding, acceptance, and intentional disruption of the status quo. This process, while often unnerving, is critical to ultimate growth and proves productive if guided by the tenets of scholarly-practice.

This article attempts to identify the processes associated with the development of my identity as a scholar-practitioner and provide insight into how I perceive its positionality in effecting change in our world. I will begin with an overview of scholar-practitioner ideology, as well as an examination of the deconstruction and construction processes of self-identity within these principles. The ideas of “otherness” and liminality are employed in an effort to explain my identity development as a personal journey that stands to profoundly influence those with whom I collaborate and/or lead.

Scholar-Practitioner as Bricoleur

Scholar-practitioners conjoin the strategies and knowledge gained through meticulous academic endeavors with experiences and knowledge inherent to membership in their craft to form the basis of effective, change-centered practices. When dually combined and utilized, theory developed through scholarly work and “inside” knowledge gained through practice becomes the bricolage of the scholar-practitioner. Sorensen (2004) states, “as a member of both cultures the practitioner-scholar is able to translate and create meaning between the two cultures. The scholar-practitioner has an appreciation of the norms, appropriate behavior and values embodied in both” (p. 160). It is upon acceptance of both cultures that the scholar-practitioner is born and thereby sets out to fashion change on the greater community.

The combination of theories, methods, and knowledge result in the scholar-practitioner’s bricolage. This idea of scholar-practitioner as bricoleur is used by Jenlink (2006) metaphorically “to represent methods, practices, and cultural materials that the scholar-practitioner uses as s/he interacts in the complex web of relationships among knowledge, inquiry, practice and learning” (p. 60). It is here that the relationship between scholar-practitioner and social justice becomes clear. As Jenlink (2006) points out, “the scholar-practitioner leader as bricoleur can take many forms” (p. 61) and “the bricoleur, in creating the bricolage, draws from a vast array of methods, materials and practices within the context of one’s practice, acknowledging the importance of methodological diversity” (p. 61).

Scholar-Practitioner as Criticalist

Throughout the process of developing an understanding of attributes that frame scholar-practitioner identity, one recognizes overarching qualities of compassion, caring, and acceptance. Those qualities possess a “. . . regard for diversity, for the distinctiveness of different cultures and for our ongoing obligation to do justice to multiplicity and difference, even as we keep alive our engagement with the art forms in the context of which we create our identities” (Greene, 2001, p. x). In addition to these guiding principles, the scholar-practitioner possesses a duty to look critically at educational systems and expose practices that facilitate the production or reproduction of oppressive societies. Scholar-practitioners seek social change and view current educational practice through a “critical lens” in an effort to quell the cultural politics “associated with inequality, control, resistance, and identity” (Anderson, 1996, p. 6). Jenlink (2006) defines the concept of school leader as criticalist:

The work of the school leader as criticalist seeks to illuminate and otherwise interrogate the social context of schools, with the inquiry focused on supporting efforts for change in social practice and cultural conditions. A critical leadership praxis is used to uncover the subtleties of oppression embedded within the cultural reproduction of society, most often associated with the public school as an often non-critical instrument of society whose function is to prepare the next generation. A critical leadership praxis is also concerned with inequity and injustice that surface within the curricula and instructional systems of schools, as well as asymmetrical power relations that all too shape student and teacher identities along ideological lines that work to control and disadvantage some while advantaging others. (p. 59)

Scholar-practitioners are concerned with effecting change on society as a whole. These individuals are scholars of social justice and cultural awareness and as such, continuously seek knowledge that benefits those they have been selected to serve. According to Jenlink (2001), “Criticality shapes the leadership praxis, bringing into play a critical philosophical and theoretical lens, thus shaping leaders’ action in the context of their practice” (p. 75). Unfortunately, harmful educational practices concealed under the sheep’s clothing of mission statements that tout social justice and democratic ideals continue to promote the status quo. Therefore, scholar-practitioners’ practices hinge on creating viable educational organizations through exposing such inequities and ensuring the fair treatment, which does not necessarily mean equal treatment, of all students. As such, scholar-practitioners embrace liminality in that it serves as a stage for deconstructing, examining, and restructuring systems and their controls. This liminal setting permits “people to escape from the rigidity of social structures and the

rules of daily existence, liminality gives them the freedom to invent new solutions to old problems, or to regard familiar things in new ways" (Carnes, 2004, p. B8). It is this function of scholar-practitioner leadership that forms the basic constructs of my identity as a scholar-practitioner.

Scholar-Practitioner Identity Construction

Adopting the ideology of scholarly-practice has facilitated the development of both my personal and professional identities and has enabled me to blur the boundary between the two. Hall (1996) posits:

Identities are never unified and, in late modern times increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation. . . . Identities are therefore constituted within, not outside representation. (p. 4)

I find that the humanistic qualities associated with the field of education as well as my personal beliefs in basic human rights, caring, and equality have converged and allow me to be more authentic and transparent in all aspects of my life. Insight gleaned from various educational theories and paradigms combine to form my personal bricolage for helping ensure that education serves to emancipate rather than shackle future generations. As Spring (2008) points out, education may be used as an instrument of enlightenment or control and in order to overcome authoritarian domination, individuals should be knowledgeable of basic human rights (p. 233). This knowledge "provides protection against wheels in the head that exploit the individual" (Spring, 2008, p. 223).

For me, the process of removing wheels in my own head required the deconstruction of past ideologies and beliefs that served to maintain harmful educational practices. In proceeding through this process I began to look more critically at all aspects of my life including the music, art, architecture, writing, and theatrical productions I encountered. Within these works, I began to recognize representations of those qualities associated with scholar-practitioner leadership. I was also beginning to understand the effects of culture and context on perception and identity. Exposure to aesthetic and literary endeavors through a scholar-practitioner lens awakens and sharpens my perception and the palimpsest of these experiences combine to form my leadership poetic; a poetic representative of my identity. As Greene (2001) posits:

Perceiving a dance, a painting, a quartet means taking it in and going out to it. Perceiving is an active probing of wholes as they become visible. It involves as it goes on, a sense of something still to be seen, of thus far

undisclosed. It requires a mental and imaginative participation . . . a consciousness of a work as something there to be achieved, depending for its full emergence on the way it is attended to and grasped. (p. 13)

The crafting of a poetic of leadership allows me to methodically unearth examples of those critical qualities from society's various forms of creative, imaginative, and literary efforts that drive my day-to-day practice. Conroy and Ruyter (2009) posit, "In the work of the poet the adoption of a liminal position is vital if she is to offer more than an affirmation of existing social, cultural and political conditions and their accompanying frameworks of interrogation/interpretation" (p. 4). Poetic construction enables me to view my craft through an aesthetic lens that provides a vantage point from which few, if any normally perform day-to-day introspection. According to Greene (2001), ". . . 'aesthetics' is the term used to single out a particular field in philosophy, one concerned about perception, sensation, imagination, and how they relate to knowing, understanding, and feeling about the world" (p. 5). She continues by explaining that the value of utilizing an aesthetic lens comes from ". . . the ways in which informed encounters with art forms—affect our being in the world" (p. 151). Just as visual artists, architects, and musicians break down their chosen mediums in order to gain fresh perspective, I, too, have attempted to deconstruct my personal views, traditions, beliefs, and understandings in an effort develop new meaning.

Deconstructing for Identity Development

A crucial step in my identity development centers on deconstructing the actions and identity of individuals within and contexts of our specific relationships and exchanges. Derrida (1999) states:

Deconstruction is quite simply what happens. It is not simply the theoretical analyses of concepts, the speculative desedimentation of a conceptual tradition, of semantics. It is something, which does something, which tries to do something, to intervene and to welcome what happens, to be attentive to the event, the singularity of the event. (p. 280)

Therefore, I have adopted the practice of viewing my dealings with colleagues, students, or parents from the various perspectives of the cultures, ideals, and histories of everyone involved, including myself. Deal and Peterson (1990) recognize culture as broad and deep and define it thusly,

Culture is a historically rooted, socially transmitted set of deep patterns of thinking and ways of acting that give meaning to human experience, that unconsciously dictate how experience is seen, assessed and acted on. Culture is a concept that helps us perceive and understand the complex

forces that work below the surface and are in the air of human groups and organizations. (p. 8)

While I have often attempted to understand the cultures and lived experiences of those with whom I come in contact in an effort to understand various points of view, deconstruction of these events requires that I also examine the effects of my culture, my whiteness on these interactions. Liminal positioning allows me to examine my social, political, and cultural underpinnings from the thresholds of their spaces. According to Conroy (2004) liminality provides “the possibility of deliberately displacing our understandings, beliefs and ideals outside the realm of others, or indeed our own, socio-psychological containment in order to view them afresh” (p. 7). This postmodernist approach to human interaction allows me to construct new meaning and promote change. According to Atkinson (2002), postmodernism effects change in that it “challenges the educator, the researcher, the social activist or the politician not only to deconstruct the certainties around which they might see as standing in need of change, but also to deconstruct their own certainties as to why they hold this view” (p. 75). Therefore, my identity has been constructed through a continuous process of deconstruction and more importantly reconstruction within awareness of the “Other.”

Derrida (1984) states that deconstruction is “an openness towards the other” (p. 124). This openness serves not only as a means for developing an understanding of Others, but a realization that Others play a role in the development of our own identity. According to Hall (1996), recognizing otherness and difference is a necessary component of the ongoing process of identity development. Hall (1996) explains:

So experience belies the notion that identification happens once and for all—life is not like that. It goes on changing and part of what is changing is not the nucleus of the ‘real you’ inside, it is history that’s changing. History changes your conception of yourself. Thus, another critical thing about identity is that it is partly the relationship between you and the Other. Only when there is an Other can you know who you are. (p. 16)

Derrida (1992) supports this notion and states that it is through interaction with “the otherness of the other” that we may advance our understanding by “reaching out to the impossible” (p. 9). That “identity is constituted by the other in the experience of the impossible” (Derrida, 1992, p. xlvi). So, as Hall (1996) states, identity is developed through rather than outside difference. He continues, “through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its constitutive outside that the ‘positive’ meaning of any term—and thus its ‘identity’—can be constructed” (p. 5).

Educational leadership in America is influenced not only by the events of the world, nation, or local community. It is also guided by various internal and

external cultural aspects and citizen demands as well as the political climate and causes of a particular governmental administration. Deconstruction of these cultural facets allows scholar-practitioners to identify which agendas are being forwarded and whether or not all students are being served. Derrida (1999) contends “in every event, not only philosophical, in every cultural event there is some deconstruction at work, something which displaces and opens a structure, a set of actions, to singularity, to something other, to some alterity, to some unpredictable future” (p. 280).

Therefore, the deconstruction of these social constructs helps develop and forward new theoretical and philosophical ideas when reconstructed on new foundations. The duty of the educational leader becomes deciphering which of these ideals best relates to the values and ethics of their schools, fosters and protects a democratic way of life, and helps ensure social justice. It is here that as a scholar-practitioner, I must consult my bricolage and take a position for those who have no voice. This is an unnerving process and Derrida (1999), himself, states that he has a “perpetual uneasiness” between his political work where he must adopt a particular position and his philosophical work characterized by continual questioning and critique.

Conclusion

In investigating the development of one’s identity as scholar-practitioner it is necessary to first come to an understanding of those elements that have shaped individual identity as well as the meaning of this identity as it relates to self and others. The process of viewing one’s identity requires recognition of how identities transform as they move fluidly through various contexts. My personal identity is different from my cultural identity, yet still connected. It is here that I have come to recognize the importance of deconstructing my identity and placing it within those contexts that illuminate new meaning and reveal deeper understanding of the family in which I seek love and comfort, the society in which I dwell and work, and the career where I attempt to expose injustice and facilitate change. By developing an understanding of my culture, I have been able to identify various codes and uses of language that serve to maintain Euro-centric, bourgeoisie dominance. The deconstruction of my past has revealed personal entrenchment in a southern plantation mentality that maintains a white hierarchy.

This deconstruction process has caused confliction about my identity as a scholar-practitioner, my relationships with coworkers, colleagues, and even family. Although this progression has consisted of periods of doubt and confusion, it is interspersed with moments of clarity. I have adopted those dispositions associated with the scholar-practitioner leadership model and accept my roles of bricoleur and criticalist. I have developed a need to develop meaning and understanding of issues relating to the students I teach, the society in which I reside, and the relationships I form. I use various critical lenses in which to

view situations and reveal those injustices facilitated by abuse of power gained through social standing, rank, or micro-politics.

Raised in the “New South” by an educated family that rallies against racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia provided me with the belief that I was a champion for those causes aimed at ending such hatred. However, I have gained new perceptions of my world through the processes of analysis and synthesis associated with seeking a terminal degree in educational leadership, and now realize that the fight for social justice must be fought on every front, both personal and public. Through the deconstruction of my history, I have come to understand that treating everyone the same while ethical, may not be moral. That hiring domestic help who have no other career choices works as much to maintain the dominant culture as not hiring an individual based on the color of her/his skin. Through the deconstruction of religion, I have become more spiritual and recognize that participation as a congregant in a temple or parishioner in a cathedral that espouses love to a sea of white faces contradicts my values.

The liminal positioning of scholar-practitioner leadership has allowed me to question and evolve in my search for clear identification. I stand at the threshold of understanding and span boundaries that others cannot. I realize that identity is not a static process and is not an individual product of my creation. Identity is developed not only through the processes of value adoption and espoused ideals, but through relationships with and perceptions of the Other. The Other is not only outside, but also inside my self, my identity.

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